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Stakeholders Argue Over Whether Middle-Mile Should Receive Infrastructure Bill Funding

Debate at an NTIA event over whether or not funding should go to the middle-mile.



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Photo of the Commerce Department building by Jim Havard used with permission.

WASHINGTON, January 31, 2022 — Stakeholders looking for broadband funding for their communities at a National Telecommunications and Information Administration listening session on Wednesday were split on whether funding should go to middle-mile infrastructure.

The NTIA, which is administering the \$42.5 billion from the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act under its Broadband, Equity, Access, and Deployment program, seeks comments from the public on a number of questions, including what criteria it should use to evaluate projects, how it should define “eligible subscriber” for the low-cost broadband service option, how it should ensure transparency and accountability, and to what extent funding should be used to build middle-mile infrastructure. Comments are due February 4, 2022.

It was on the latter question that sparked a division between those who think there should be substantial funding for the transport route – which carries traffic to the cable that plugs into homes and businesses – and those who argued it should not.

Though some of the meeting’s attendees felt that the middle-mile should receive no funding at all, others argued that middle-mile and last-mile infrastructure are linked. In other words, if there’s no middle-mile, there can be no last-mile to fund either. “The last-mile and the middle-mile have a symbiotic relationship,” said one commentator.

Other attendees said that they do not feel like they are able to pick a particular side of the argument because the middle-mile needs to be better defined.

At the Digital Infrastructure Investment conference in Houston in September, **Sunne Wright McPeak**, president and CEO of the California Emerging Technology Fund, said stakeholders interested in expanding broadband rollout should focus on the last mile, the stretch of cable that connects the middle-mile to homes and businesses.

“I would rather leverage the resources and infrastructure they’ve [internet service providers] already built – that we as taxpayers and ratepayers have already paid for – and tap into that in order to focus on last-mile,” she said at the conference.

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